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The Diary of Calvin Fletcher and the Historians

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"In former years I kept a Journal or diary of the occurrancies of life and important dai[l]y transactions. And I now most sincerely regret that I had not continued the same with regularity and care down to the present piriod, at the age of thirty one (in Feb. next). Many transactions worthy of note are now forgotten, others the recollection of which is very imperfect, and which I some times have wanted and often may hereafter want in aid of the adjustment in my own mind [of] some difficulty which had grown out of imperfect recollection of facts."

—CALVIN FLETCHER, *1 January 1829*

CALVIN FLETCHER *at Two Hundred*

1798–1998

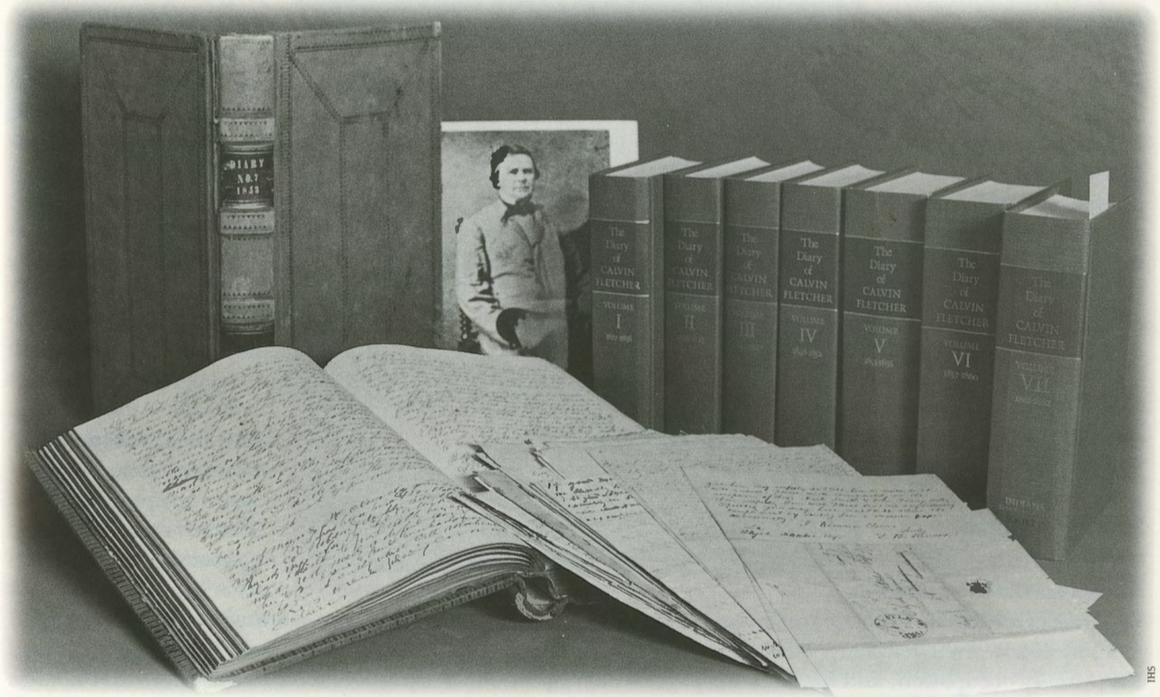
While we all make New Year's resolutions, few of us ever keep them with the tenacity that Calvin Fletcher kept the one he apparently made on this day. The diary that he had begun in fragmentary fashion in 1817 and continued intermittently to 1829, he maintained religiously thereafter. In so doing, he provided us with an extraordinary record of his life and times. Published in nine volumes by the Indiana Historical Society from 1972 to 1983, *The Diary of Calvin Fletcher* represents perhaps the single most important printed source for understanding Indiana's history. In commemoration of Fletcher's two-hundredth birthday on 4 February 1998, *Traces* looks back at the diary and its impact on how we see ourselves.

The Diary of Calvin Fletcher and the Historians

George Geib

"In the summer of 1821 the Delaware Indians left the central part of Indiana then a total wilderness. . . . I had married; and on my request my worthy partner permitted me to leave him, to take up my residence at the place designated as the seat of government of Indiana."

—CALVIN FLETCHER,
25 March 1861, from a letter to the secretary of the New England Historical & Genealogical Register *(diary entry, 28 March 1861)*



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On display in front of a photograph of Calvin Fletcher are two of the original diaries and seven volumes of the edited diaries.

He was born in Vermont on 4 February 1798 and moved west to the new frontier that opened after the War of 1812. He arrived in Marion County, Indiana, in 1822 with the earliest settlers, and he made the county his home for the rest of his life. He helped create a new society in an era of profound and often unprecedented change. We know him well because he recorded his experiences in a remarkable series of letters and diaries that are an essential source for the study of early Indiana. We owe our easy access to him to some remarkable publishing partnerships that extended across half of our own century. If you haven't encountered Calvin Fletcher, make the nine-volume edition of his diaries, published by the Indiana Historical Society from 1972 to 1983, part of your future reading program. It will reward your time.

The publication of the diaries struck an especially responsive chord among Hoosier historians in our time because Fletcher's experiences confirmed so many of the popular interpretive themes that we have used to give direction and understanding to local studies. It confirmed

our view that Indiana's population fashioned a blend of the distinctive regional cultures of the Atlantic seaboard: New England, middle state, and southern. Fletcher filled his pages with descriptions of men, and occasionally women, of other regions, noting their speech patterns, their moral characteristics, and the responses they encountered on a developing frontier. His account of the first time he saw Abraham Lincoln is typical of Fletcher's approach. "I went with Mr. Hines at 7 to Masonic Hall to hear Honl. Ab Lincoln of Illinois speak at that place He is a plain commonsense man without much polish Evidently a back woods man. [19 September 1859]"

Fletcher was particularly useful in documenting the presence of the New England mind-set. Given the small number of residents that, according to the U.S. Census, came to Indiana from that area, historians tended to underplay their influence until we watched Fletcher impose his stamp upon central Indiana. He was in so many ways the quintessential New Englander, with his careful records, his agrarian interests, his improving ways, and his moral imperatives. "I have not been fortunate in any one undertaking in life where I have acted against my own judgment from fear, hatred or unmanly friendship. [25 July 1838]" Fletcher always addressed farming as his primary occupation, and he filled his pages with records of weather, soil, crops, livestock, and markets. He delighted in the physical activities of the farm, and to the end of his life he worked to bring in the harvest on his extensive acres.

His diaries also went far to confirm the links many historians now draw between economic changes and the reform ferment of antebellum America. Fletcher's extensive land holdings made him a commercial farmer and undoubtedly helped account for the way the world of farming was always linked in his mind to the new economic measures of his time. Whether the issue was internal improvements, credit, legal arrangement, or land sale, he assumed a leadership role at some point in his life. By the 1840s he was an "essential man" whose presence in support of a project usually heralded its success. Because later banks in the city bore his family name, it has become common to see him primarily as an agent of sound money and credit. Yet in his diaries, banking plays a much less visible role than does transportation. Anyone wondering about the origins of the Indianapolis emphasis upon man-made ways to compensate for the absence of navigable water need look little further than Fletcher's early interest in toll roads and steam railways.

> *Read it for its own sake to enjoy a remarkable man as he lives in remarkable times. And value it as well for what it has helped to set in motion in modern local historical study.*

Economic improvement was unacceptable in Fletcher's mind if it was not accompanied by moral judgment. "Altho there is no legal obligations, I feel always bound to give satisfaction & not retreat under limitation laws. [12 December 1862]" Like many in his age, Fletcher spent time encouraging churches and, especially, Sunday schools. He was less interested in denominational distinctions than he was in the personal piety that impelled men and women to dedicate their lives to spiritual and personal improvement. Seldom the extremist, Fletcher was instead an educator and motivator who sought to draw as large a portion of the community as possible into his causes, which would range in his lifetime over much of the reform spectrum: free public schools, temperance, and colonization for free Blacks among them. A pragmatist who sought to build upon public opinion, and thus a man who shunned lost causes, he consistently hoped to create better individuals who could then in their turn promote better measures. It is worth reading him as he laments the shifts of public sentiment that doom immediate adoption of a Maine-style "bone-dry" liquor prohibition in Indianapolis. "The State temperance society meet today. I regret I signed my name to the call But few will attend I apprehend. With a Drunken debauched Governor . . . a drunken debauched president of the state university . . . & worse than all a corrupt bribed Sup. [Court] bench . . . —With such a state of affairs what moral reform can be made. [18 January 1859]"

Fletcher spoke much of politics in his writings and addressed issues in ways that fitted well with historians' interests in the shifting alignments of people and parties in that era. As an improver, a reformer, and a Whig, Fletcher seemed to exemplify the concept of themes of modernization that political scholars were using to define that party and to contrast it with the western Democracy. Better still for the interpreters, Fletcher's subsequent shifts of allegiance—first to the Free Soil movement and then, somewhat reluctantly, to the Republican party—conformed well to the pattern of moral concern that a new generation of social historians was using to explain party formation. The issues that gripped him in his diaries were the abuses heaped upon the freedman and the reformer, whether in Marion County or far away in Kansas. Fletcher's resentment at the treatment of John Freeman, a freed slave whose meager possessions were lost in his legal fight to avoid a corrupt slave taker, reflects the direction of his forceful indignation. "I have had a call from his wife. I would turn out at once but counsel are employed. I have already had some unpleasant words with our officers who have taken secretly a part with the Slaveholders. [21 June 1853]"

Important as Fletcher was to recent historians, it could be argued that his most impressive contribution was his service to local history itself. The same passion that led him to promote education also made him a friend of the study of local history. In his lifetime he made multiple attempts to advance both the Old Settlers Society and the Indiana Historical Society, and through his family he handed his remarkable papers down for posterity. The diaries, bound in a dozen volumes, were donated by his family to the Indiana Historical Society in the 1920s. There they caught the attention of one of the key figures in local study, Eli Lilly. By 1930 Lilly had read the manuscript and clearly liked what he had seen. Lilly surely saw a kindred spirit—a businessman of broad interests, a respectable reformer concerned with his local community, an educator with a special flair for local history, and a literate man who saw his wealth in the context of stewardship. "I think a young man . . . unworthy of a place a home a good character who can not act like a man feel like a man able to battle with world as the most distinguished men of our nation have beginning in poverty gradually going forward to wealth & usefulness. May the Lord impress the lesson. [26 August 1850]" Lilly took the lead in arranging for the initial transcription of the manuscript in the 1930s.

It was not until a generation later that the series finally saw print, edited by a group of scholar-historians who had developed their skills bringing much of the current canon of Indiana history to the public. Gayle Thornbrough was the central figure here, in later cooperation with Dorothy Riker and Paula Corpuz. The project was not without challenge. For all of his interest in his mature years, Fletcher had failed to keep the volumes of his youth. He was already a successful lawyer and community leader when the serious entries began in the 1830s, denying us a detailed vision of the first decade in Indianapolis. Realizing the need to fill this gap, the editors turned to other Fletcher family papers, relying in particular upon journals and diaries of his wife, Sarah Hill Fletcher, and letters to family members who had remained in Vermont. Having once done so, the editors supplemented subsequent volumes with similar documents, adding texture and information but sometimes interrupting the tone and message of Fletcher's diary. The real imbalance of the volumes, however, was of Fletcher's own choosing. Caught up in the events of the Civil War, and often reflecting at length upon the course and meaning of events, he created a record between 1861 and 1865 that was as long as that he kept in either the 1840s or the 1850s. Most readers grow a bit tired as they move through the last volumes.

Whether the content of the Fletcher diaries serves future generations as well as it has served ours will, no doubt, depend upon the questions that upcoming generations of historians ask. But in one way, whatever the fashions, the diaries will leave a clear mark. No feature of the Indiana history scene in the last quarter century has been of more importance than the dramatic expansion of the infrastructure of historical resources. Through the creation of catalogs and indices, through the conservation and expansion of collections, through transcription and translation, through a new consciousness of the importance of historical records and their access, local historical resources are both more varied and more accessible than ever before. No one project or person can claim sole credit for that change. But among the projects that mobilized support, and that demonstrated the opportunities and the excitement possible through access to Indiana's local records, the Fletcher project was clearly a central, highly visible model. Read it for its own sake to enjoy a remarkable man as he lives in remarkable times. And value it as well for what it has helped to set in motion in modern local historical study. It's a good way to celebrate Calvin's birthday.

George Geib teaches the Jacksonian period of American history at Butler University with a special attention to the experiences of the Midwest. He wrote about President Benjamin Harrison for the fall 1996 issue of Traces.